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The Cognitive and Hermeneutic Dynamics of Complex Film Narratives

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SAMENVATTING

De cognitieve en hermeneutische dynamiek van narratieve complexiteit in cinema.

Sinds de late jaren negentig van de vorige eeuw is er een opvallende toename geweest van complexe verhaalvormen in populaire films. Bekende voorbeelden als *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Inception* (2010) of *Arrival* (2016) maken gebruik van narratie die gekenmerkt wordt door non-lineariteit, fragmentatie, ambiguïteit, onbetrouwbare vertellers, of logische tegenstrijdigheden. Dergelijke experimenten met complexe verteltechnieken waren voorheen vooral het terrein van kunstfilms of ‘hogere’ literatuur, maar zijn nu wijdverbreid in hedendaagse populaire audiovisuele fictie.

Deze trend is door filmwetenschappers opgemerkt en bediscussieerd onder noemers als ‘complex cinema’ (Staiger 2006; Simons 2008; Mittell 2015) ‘puzzle films’ (Buckland 2009, 2014) en ‘modular’ (Cameron 2009) of ‘multiform narratives’ (Campora 2014). Bestaande studies bieden veelal typologieën van de complexe vormen van narratie in hedendaagse fictiefilms, of beschrijven de technologische, culturele, of media-historische context waarin deze films opkwamen. De vraag wat er echter specifiek is aan de kijkervaring die zulke films bieden, of waarin de aantrekkingskracht van narratieve complexiteit schuilt voor kijkers, is onderbelicht gebleven. De kwestie vraagt om een beter begrip van hoe zulke verhalen kijkers stimuleren; immers, een hoge mate van complexiteit kan de immersieve, communicatieve en mimetische functies die we normaliter aan verhalen toeschrijven in de weg staan. En waarom zouden kijkers plezier scheppen in een verhaal dat hen verwart?

Deze dissertatie stelt dat een adequaat begrip van deze vraagstukken vraagt om een benadering die niet enkel gericht is op het bestuderen van de complexe verhaalstructuren zelf, maar ook op de cognitieve effecten en interpretatieve activiteiten die hun formele-structurele experimenten veroorzaken en uitlokken. Dit onderzoek verbindt theorieën en perspectieven uit de filmwetenschap, narratieve theorie, en cognitiewetenschappen om te onderzoeken wat voor cognitieve en interpretatieve activiteit complexe verhaalvormen vragen van hun kijkers. Door grip te krijgen op de specifieke wijzen waarop zulke films inspelen op de cognitieve capaciteit, verwachtingen en interpretatieve processen van kijkers tracht de studie een beter begrip te verkrijgen van de specifieke kijkervaring die complexiteit in een verhaal kan bieden, alsook de mogelijke esthetische effecten hiervan. Is het zo dat zulke verhaalvormen de zelfreflexieve functies van eerdere modernistische en postmoderne vormen van fictie uitbreiden naar populaire media? Bieden ze een specifieke mimetische ervaring? Of vormen ze uitdagende cognitieve puzzels voor kijkers die meer (inter)actieve participatie gewend zijn? Door te onderzoeken hoe ervaringen van narratieve complexiteit ontstaan uit de dynamische interactie tussen de diverse complexe narratieve vormen van films, de cognitieve en interpretatieve processen van kijkers, en de historische en culturele context waarin deze elkaar treffen en vormgeven probeert deze studie zulke kwesties beter te begrijpen. Hiertoe brengt de dissertatie vier eerder gepubliceerde studies samen (drie hoofdstukken uit een monografie en één artikel) plus een introductie, bredere conceptuele discussie en een slothoofdstuk reflecterend op verdere onderzoeksperspectieven.

Studie 1 onderzoekt hoe films narratieve complexiteit creëren door in te spelen op diverse cognitieve processen en capaciteiten van kijkers. Het formeren en begrijpen van narrativiteit wordt in veel wetenschappelijke disciplines gezien als een belangrijk instrument van de menselijke cognitie om ervaringen en gebeurtenissen te bevatten en te ordenen. Dit hoofdstuk beargumenteert dat complexe films werken door verteltechnieken te gebruiken die deze mentale formatie van een verhaal(structuur) tijdelijk of voortdurend ondermijnen en zo meer cognitief en interpretatief werk vragen van toeschouwers om alle narratieve informatie te verenigen in een causaal-chronologisch, coherente en/of betekenisvolle ketting van gebeurtenissen. Op basis van deze definitie theoretiseert de studie de relaties tussen de diverse verteltechnieken die films gebruiken (bijvoorbeeld het problematiseren van narratieve lineariteit, het verstoren van de ontologische orde van een verhaalwereld, meerdere ingebedde of metaleptische verhaalstructuren, het presenteren van tegenstrijdige of onbetrouwbare informatie, of een tekort of overdaad aan narratieve aanwijzingen) en de effecten van complexiteit die ze creëren. Tot slot herzielt dit hoofdstuk bestaande typologieën en categorisering van complexe films door ze in te delen op basis van de relatieve cognitieve complexiteit die ze in de kijkervaring teweeg brengen.

Studie 2 richt zich op de vraag hoe kijkers op deze uitdagingen reageren middels verscheidene cognitief-interpretatieve strategieën. De studie theoretiseert hoe kijkers verschillende ‘coping strategies’ gebruiken om narratieve ambiguïteit, incoherentie, dissonantie of andere cognitief ‘verontrustende’ effecten van een verhaal te beteugelen. Het hoofdstuk brengt in kaart welke conventionele paden kijkers hiervoor gebruiken, alsook hoe sommige films strategisch ambiguïteit en onzekerheden creëren in zulke interpretatieve processen. Op basis van de analyses beargumenteert het hoofdstuk dat een centraal aspect van de ervaring van cinematografische narratieve complexiteit schuilt in het creatieve plezier (en mogelijke reflectieve effect) dat dit proces van het ontrafelen of toekennen van coherentie, consonantie, of mimetische betekenisvolheid aan een verhaal kan bieden, daar het kijkers uitnodigt hun analytische vaardigheden en hermeneutische competenties te testen.

Studie 3 biedt een meer film-historische benadering die kijkt naar de tradities van filmmaken waarin narratieve complexiteit het meest prominent heeft gefungeerd – in het bijzonder de naoorlogse modernistische kunstfilm en de hedendaagse populaire ‘puzzle film.’ Het hoofdstuk beargumenteert dat hoewel deze tradities en contexten van filmmaken deels gebruik hebben gemaakt van vergelijkbare verteltechnieken, ze niettemin ook verschillende ervaringen van narratieve complexiteit bieden. Dit is het gevolg van de verschillende interpretatieve houdingen die ze in kijkers stimuleren. Het hoofdstuk laat zien hoe een traditie als de kunstfilm (‘art cinema’) niet alleen als een historische en formele cinematografische categorie gezien moet worden, maar ook als een contextueel en cognitief interpretatiekader dat kijkers specifieke coping strategies biedt om met narratieve complexiteit om te gaan. Zulke kaders leiden kijkers niet alleen tot specifieke vormen van interpretatie, maar scheppen ook verschillende esthetische ervaringen van cinematografische complexiteit, door andere vormen van naturalisatie van de complexiteit aan te reiken die een breder pallet aan mimetische, metafictionele, of zelfs ‘non-narratieve’ (poëtische, lyrische of affectieve) kijkhoudingen toelaten. Het tweede deel van dit hoofdstuk richt zich tenslotte op een specifieke set hedendaagse films die in *Studie 1* onderscheiden werden als ‘impossible puzzle films’ en laat zien hoe deze films elementen uit twee narratieve tradities balanceren: deze films maken enerzijds gebruik van dissonante en verstorende verteltechnieken vergelijkbaar met die van eerdere kunstfilms, maar omkaderen deze tegelijkertijd ook met meer conventionele vertelstrategieën uit klassieke narratieve films en genres. Hierdoor nodigen ze kijkers uit om de narratieve mysteries en conflicten te benaderen met een ‘klassieke’ analytische en

immersieve kijkhouding, gericht op het vinden van logische coherentie en klassiek-mimetische narrativiteit – kwaliteiten die deze films tegelijkertijd ondermijnen of verbergen.

Studie 4 is een case study van David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive* uit 2001 – één van de meest veelbesproken en populaire complexe films van de laatste decennia. Doel van dit hoofdstuk is te onderzoeken hoe *Mulholland Drive* een breed publiek heeft gefascineerd door middel van een complexe en enigmatische verhaalstructuur, die tevens een veelvoud aan (vaak tegenstrijdige) interpretaties voort heeft gebracht. De studie zet allereerst de uiteenlopende lezingen van critici en kijkers uiteen, om vervolgens de textuele en contextuele elementen die aan deze interpretaties ten grondslag liggen te analyseren. Het hoofdstuk hypotheetiseert vervolgens dat de aantrekkingskracht van *Mulholland Drive* schuilt in een specifieke oscillatie tussen twee conflicterende 'cognitieve kadreringen' die de complexe verhaalstructuur toelaat: enerzijds die van een verwarrende maar uitnodigende narratieve puzzel die opgelost kan worden tot een min of meer klassiek verhaal; en anderzijds die van een minder narratieve en meer thematische en affectieve ervaring, geïnspireerd door surrealistische, experimentele en modernistische kunstfilms. Beide kijkhoudingen worden ondersteund door de aanwezigheid van narratieve, stilistische en contextuele aanwijzingen die inspelen op patronen en verwachtingen uit zowel klassiek-narratieve films als experimentele kunstfilms. De analyse laat zo zien hoe de verschillende interpretaties van de film begrepen kunnen worden als het gevolg van de conflicterende cognitieve kadreringen die de film oproept ten aanzien van zijn complexe narratieve vorm. Hiermee illustreert de casus hoe ervaringen van narratieve complexiteit gevormd worden door een dynamische cognitieve interactie tussen de complexe vertelvormen van een film, de cognitieve en interpretatieve kaders van kijkers, en de contextuele en culturele tradities waarbinnen deze fungeren – alsook hoe films deze dynamiek strategisch kunnen gebruiken voor effecten van complexiteit.

Het vijfde hoofdstuk bouwt tot slot voort op de eerdere bevindingen om preliminaire hypothesen te formuleren over de vraag naar de mogelijke aantrekkingskracht van complexe narratieve ervaringen (als hermeneutisch spel, als cognitieve speelplaats, als mimetische expressievorm, of als eudaimonische reflectie) en over de plek die zulke cinema inneemt in de bredere hedendaagse audiovisuele cultuur. Het hoofdstuk besluit met enkele reflecties op richtingen voor mogelijk verder onderzoek, zoals de rol van mediumspecificiteit, emotie en affect, of ideologie in ervaringen met cinematografische narratieve complexiteit.

CV

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